

3 MAY 1980

Britain grants political asylum to former KGB man and family

STAT

By John Hooper and Iain Guest in Geneva

A former KGB officer—WHO staff of 4,378. Thirty-two missing for more than five of these are based at the headquarters in Geneva—has been given permission by the Government to stay in Britain.

Mr. Ilya Grigorovich Dzhirkvelov, aged 33, worked in the information department of the World Health Organisation in Geneva until his disappearance on March 21.

A former colleague described him as "a hard-working man with only moderate English who kept to himself." But he was also said to be a flashy dresser and he drove an American car.

It seemed that the Russians had no idea where Mr Dzhirkvelov went after he, his wife and his daughter, aged five, disappeared. The Russians had by last night still not made any approach to the British authorities since the defection.

In Geneva, a spokesman for the WHO said that Mr Dzhirkvelov had announced on March 21 that he would be returning to the Soviet Union for a few days on private business, leaving his wife and daughter in Geneva. His colleagues had not heard from him since.

Dzhirkvelov worked in the WHO's office of information where he coordinated the Russian publication of the organisation's monthly magazine and handled visiting Russian journalists. He rarely travelled on missions.

His background was journalistic. First, with Tass, the Soviet news agency in Moscow, then as deputy secretary general of the Russian union of journalists. He also served as Tass correspondent in Tanzania and the Sudan. In 1977 he joined WHO on a two-year contract, which was renewed last year.

His background might provide insights into the workings of Soviet intelligence abroad. But United Nations officials are playing down press reports that Geneva is a nest of spies, despite several incidents in recent years.

The Russians contribute £12 million towards this year's budget of £110 million. There are only 60 Russians in the WHO staff of 4,378. Thirty-two missing for more than five weeks—has been given permission by the Government to stay in Britain.

While Western diplomats conceded that the Russians are underrepresented in the UN and that, as one puts it, "they stick out like a sore thumb," they argue that the Russians make up for this by trying to corner key positions, particularly in personnel, which allows them access to classified information.

Within WHO, a Russian holds the post of the unit responsible for hiring and firing. In one of the most recent celebrated spy stories, the Americans and British protested strongly against the appointment on Gely Dneprovsky, thought to have been a senior KGB officer, as head of UN personnel in Geneva. Dr Waldheim, UN Secretary General, held an inquiry but found no reason to withdraw the appointment.

Another sensitive post currently held by the Russians at the Palais des Nations is the head of interpretation and conference services. In recent years there have also been cases of Russian agents discovered in the International Labour Organisation, which is involved in talks with Moscow over dissident trade unions.

A second key objective of the Russians is said to be making contact with young diplomats from the Third World who attend conferences. They hope the diplomats will be useful when they reach senior positions in their government.

But diplomats also point out that the KGB label probably means little since all Russians in Geneva are almost certainly under orders to report any useful information to their government.

Even though this is expressly forbidden by UN rules, there is little doubt that it is also practised by the West. Earlier this year the Swiss Government reported that between 1947 and 1977 that between 1947 and 1977 cases of espionage had been uncovered in Switzerland.